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FROM WASHTENAW COUNTY TO CHINA IN 1847

By F. Clever Bald

Judson Dwight Collins, a resident of Washtenaw County, was one of the first two missionaries sent to China by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Born in New York in 1823, he had been brought to Michigan by his parents, who settled on a farm in Lyndon Township. Sepheus and Betsy Collins were earnest, pious folk. Through their influence, four of their eight sons became ministers. Judson was a serious lad who made a public profession of faith at a revival in the Methodist church in Ann Arbor when he was fourteen years old.

Collins entered the University of Michigan when it opened in the fall of 1841, and he was one of the eleven in the first class that was graduated four years later. On the day after Commencement he began to keep a diary.* The first sentence began: "Today I took sorrowful leave of my old schoolmates...."

After a few days at home he attended a Methodist camp meeting at Salem and another at Dexter. Collins wanted to go as a missionary to China; but because his denomination had no mission there, he filed an application with the Board and took a teaching position in the Wesleyan Seminary, now Albion College.

When the term opened, he had a heavy schedule, teaching Chemistry, Botany, Rhetoric, Latin, and Greek. Besides, he began the study of Anatomy and Hebrew. The former he enjoyed; the latter he found very difficult. In addition to his teaching and his studies, he taught a Sunday School class, preached, and conducted prayer meetings.

These activities would have taxed the energies of a sturdy person. Collins, unfortunately, was not strong. Entries in his

*The material for this article was taken principally from Collins's three diaries in the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan. It is a condensation of an article by the same author published in the Fall Number, 1955, of the Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review.

diary indicate that he suffered from indigestion. As a precaution he ate sparingly, and insufficient food impaired his strength. In spite of good intentions, he was frequently too sleepy in the evening to study. One day he fell asleep and missed both his Botany and his Latin classes. Attempting to make the best use of his time, he decided to devote two hours a day to reading scripture, meditation and prayer, to make a schedule for the following day, and to keep his journal up to date. "Journalizing," as he called it, had for its principal purpose to provide a record of his achievements and his failures day by day.

Collins was very self-critical. Once he wrote in his diary: "Another week gone into eternity and what a report it carries. A dreadful account of misspent time and abused privileges. I have overeat and overslept and indulged in lagging this week, and have not journalized -- in all these respects I mean to reform this week, by the help of God."

The young man, however, did not spend all his time in self-condemnation. Sometimes he went for a stroll along the Kalamazoo River, and in his diary he recorded his pleasure in the beauty of nature. Observing the birds, animals, trees, wild flowers, and running water made him very happy.

Collins continued to teach at Albion until the spring of 1847, when he received a call to go to China. In New York on April 1, he was ordained, and he sailed from Boston on April 15. With him were the Rev. Dr. Moses C. White, a physician, the other missionary of the Methodist Church, and Mrs. White.

Their ship was the sailing vessel Heber. During the first few days, the sea was rough, and the ship pitched and rolled alarmingly. Most of the passengers, including Collins, were sick. On the sixth day out he felt so wretched that he decided he would have to suffer throughout the voyage for the gospel's sake. Then the sickness passed, and he blamed himself for his little faith. "The Lord was just about to be gracious to me," he wrote. Collins ate breakfast and dinner and began to enjoy the trip.

Collins's interest in nature kept him on the lookout for creatures that were new to him. He reported seeing Mother Carey's chickens, an albatross, a school of porpoises, and a whale. Once he caught a flying fish. On clear nights he enjoyed watching the stars above and the bright phosphorescence that outlined the hull of the ship at the water line. During a severe storm Collins was on deck as often as possible. To him the ship was a courageous creature, bravely breasting the waves. He had no fear, and he reveled in the tumultuous grandeur of the ocean.

The voyage was long and tedious. Sometimes the Heber was becalmed for days. Collins had planned to spend a great deal of time in religious exercises and in the study of Chinese and Hebrew. Soon he was chiding himself for not having kept to his schedule. Worldly diversions were to some extent responsible. For example, on one occasion he watched a group playing cards. On another, he played several games of backgammon, and once, checkers. These activities, he decided, were a waste of time if nothing worse. He promised God that he would engage in them no more.

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Collins was very self-critical. Thus he wrote in his diary: "Another week gone like eternity and what a report it carries. A dreadful account of misspent time and abused privileges. I have overeat and overslept and indulged in talking this week, and have not journalized -- in all these respects I need to reform this week, by the help of God."

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On June 19 the Heber rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed into the Indian Ocean. Holding a northeasterly course, she passed between Sumatra and Java. Soon she was off the China coast, and she cast anchor in the Min River early in August, 1847. Transferring to a smaller ship, the missionaries proceeded up river to Foochow.

The old city, surrounded by a wall thirty feet high and twelve feet thick, lay on the left bank of the river, about thirty-five miles from its mouth. On the right bank was the newer town, Nantai, where foreigners were permitted to live. Between the two cities the river was divided by an island on which the missionaries settled. Bridges connected the island with both cities.

Collins engaged a Chinese teacher and began to study the language. Apparently he had not the gift of tongues, for progress was slow. His first teacher, Collins decided, was incompetent; and so he dismissed him and engaged another. The missionary discovered that his teacher's position was not an enviable one. To avoid arrest for teaching a foreigner, he had to pay hush money to an official. Foreigners, the teacher explained, offended the Chinese by walking about with "an imperious gait and high heads."

On February 28, 1848, Collins opened a school for boys. There were at first only eight pupils, taught by a Chinese whose salary was six dollars a month. The missionary found the school very interesting, writing in his diary that he had not known a class of boys in America more prompt and correct in answering questions. One mischiefmaker set up a Confucian tablet in the schoolroom and burned incense before it. Collins removed the offending articles as soon as he discovered them. On January 1, 1849, Collins opened another school with seventeen pupils. He gave no account of the curriculum except to mention the fact that he taught the boys the Lord's Prayer, probably in English.

Distributing tracts was another of his occupations. Sometimes alone and sometimes with a companion, he passed through the city or through neighboring villages giving Christian literature to those who would take it. Usually the tracts were accepted, largely out of curiosity, Collins suspected.

On one occasion when he was preaching and offering tracts, he was rudely jostled and his cap was knocked off several times. Although he suffered no injury except to his dignity, he considered whether or not he should desist. His decision was that he "should not so easily yield to the enemy." Soon afterwards he was called a foreign dog and warned that the missionaries would be killed if they did not leave China. Collins, nevertheless, continued his work, and usually his hearers were polite.

In Foochow as in Albion, Collins found that his strength was not equal to the tasks he set himself. Although he prepared a rigid schedule of work, he could not long maintain it. Chinese was difficult for him, and he made little progress in the study of Hebrew. His eyes gave him trouble and he complained of being sleepy. Frequently he had debilitating attacks of diarrhoea or dysentery. In February, 1849, he was stricken with a fever, and,

in spite of the ministrations of his colleague, Dr. White, he had a long and serious illness.

Collins was probably too ill to remember what was done for him. Perhaps he received the same treatment as his colleague, who later came down with a fever. The doctor ordered a cold bath. According to the diary, "They put Brother White into a great tub and throwed three pails of cold water upon his head." Collins reported, "He enjoyed it much."

While Collins was convalescing, the doctor decided that he must take a sea voyage to restore his health. Accompanied by a Chinese servant, he left Foochow on April 3, 1849, in a lorcha, a fast sailing vessel with the hull of a European ship, rigged in the Chinese fashion. The lorcha was armed, and it was usually surrounded by a flock of junks which sought its protection from pirates. The ship stopped frequently, and Collins went ashore, distributing tracts, picking up shells, and purchasing fish for anatomical study.

They sailed north, and Collins visited missionaries at Ningpo and Shanghai. He was greatly interested in the strange sights in the cities of China, and he was amazed by the luxuriance of the vegetation in the country. Some magnificent roses reminded him of those he had known in Michigan. At Shanghai he went aboard the United States Sloop Plymouth. The commander, Thomas R. Gedney, "a square-faced, rough old fellow," received him cordially, and the missionary was impressed by the armament of thirty-two and sixty-four pounders.

Collins's health improved considerably during his trip. In his diary he set down many details of what he had seen: silkworms spinning cocoons, men and women winding the silk on reels, strange customs of the natives, and the beauty of pagadas, of the countryside, and of the sea. Once while the ship was anchored at night, he was amazed at the glowing phosphorescence of the waves. He dipped up a bucketful and thrust his hand in. When he drew it out, it was covered with little creatures, "radiant with light which they gave off at intervals like a firefly. They were each smaller than a pin head."

After he returned to Foochow, wishing to live alone, Collins purchased a large lot on the island and had a house built. In his diary he recorded the difficulties he had with the carpenter, the well-digger, and with the crowds of Chinese who came to watch the construction. The last he angrily chased away. After a slow beginning in November, 1849, the house was completed in March, 1850. Collins planted orange trees and roses in the front yard and had a garden behind the house. On April 8 he planted corn.

Living in his own house, Collins found, was not without its annoyances. The first night, a robber broke into the kitchen and stole a lock, a copper kettle, and a boiler. His servants sometimes drove him almost to distraction. Once he flogged Han, his table boy, for eating a pudding which was intended for guests. Later he punished him for trying to induce the milkman to tell Collins that the price of milk had gone up, in order to cover Han's speculations.

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While Collins was convalescing, the doctor decided that he must take a sea voyage to restore his health. Accompanied by a Chinese servant, he left Macao on April 3, 1840, in a Lorcha, a fast sailing vessel with the hull of a European ship, rigged in the Chinese fashion. The lorcha was armed, and it was usually surrounded by a flock of junks which sought the protection from pirates. The ship stopped frequently, and Collins went ashore, obtaining fresh, plucking up shells, and purchasing fish for sumptuous study.

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Having in his own house, Collins found he was not without its annoyances. The first night, a robber broke into the kitchen and stole a lock, a copper kettle, and a bolt. His servants were terrified. Almost every night there was an alarm. He flogged Han, his table boy, for waiting, which was intended for guests. Issue he purchased and for tricking the innocent Chinaman to tell Collins that the price of milk had gone up. In order to prevent Han's speculations,

After having despaired of correcting his lying and stealing, Collins appealed to Han's father. His advice was to flog the boy thoroughly. When Collins reported his intention to Han, he was abjectly repentant and began to pray. The missionary's heart was touched, and he decided not to punish him. According to the diary, he continued to tell lies, but Collins expressed the hope that by God's grace he would be reformed.

The cook also made trouble, on one occasion threatening to leave when Collins reduced his wages because he had spent four days in idleness. The man finally agreed to remain. Then Collins changed his mind. "I must pay him for those days' work. I cannot stand before my judge if he reckons so strictly with me. How many, many of my Master's days have been spent to little purpose. I pray for forgiveness and do now from my heart forgive this man his debt. With a wife and three children to feed, it must be close, careful living which will feed them all." Collins frequently condemned himself for his impatience with the natives and an irritable manner toward them, and he prayed for "a loving deportment toward the Chinese."

On May 2, 1850, Collins was appointed superintendent of the Foochow Mission. Previously, after the departure of the Rev. Mr. Hickok, there had been some difference of opinion between Collins and White as to which was in charge. Collins accepted the appointment humbly, requesting prayers for his guidance and support. To his diary he confided: "The work is indeed [full] of difficulties, requiring at many points much delicacy of dealing; and I am not delicate."

Collins's health, which had been fair for a time, failed again, and his physician again prescribed a sea voyage. He left Foochow on September 25, 1850. This time he sailed south to Amoy, Hong Kong, Whampoa, and Canton. In each of those cities he found missionaries. Although he was quite ill, he accepted an invitation to preach on Sunday in Canton. The return voyage was stormy, and he was seasick a great part of the time. Nevertheless he frequently noted a beautiful sunset.

The sea voyage was of no avail. Collins was so ill that in December his physician urged him to go home, and in January, 1851, the Rev. Mr. White informed the Mission Board that Collins could not live long if he remained in China. Collins feared that the prediction was true, but he hated to quit, and he expressed the hope that his health would improve. On February 12, he observed his twenty-eighth birthday.

When his condition failed to improve, Collins finally accepted the advice of the physician and of the other missionaries and prepared to leave. On April 23, 1851, he set sail for Hong Kong, and in May he began his return voyage to America. On the long journey home he had much time to reflect on his nearly four years' labor in China. He probably was unhappy in the knowledge that not a single convert had been made during that time. In fact, the Methodist Mission had been established nine years before any Chinese became Christians. His only consolation must have been that he had done his best.

Collins arrived in Detroit in September, 1851, while the Michigan Annual Conference of the Methodist Church was in session. The returned missionary entered the church unannounced. Two of his brothers, members of the Conference, recognized him in spite of his emaciated appearance. They hastened to greet him. His name quickly passed from delegate to delegate; he was called to the pulpit, and the assembly arose to welcome him as a hero of the faith.

The missionary's health continued to fail, and he died at his home on May 15, 1852. The funeral service was held in the Methodist Church in Unadilla of which the family were members, and he was buried in a small cemetery not far from town. Beside the church in Unadilla a boulder bears a plaque in memory of Judson Dwight Collins.

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